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ABSTRACT

Family literacy is relevant in the education of the child, especially in the South African context with its millions of people, especially those in disadvantaged rural areas, who are currently illiterate or insufficiently literate. The level of literacy in the home and a child's exposure to learning experiences influence the success of instruction at school, which in turn forms the key to scholastic and later vocational achievement. The home environment should provide a more basic type of learning than that done in schools. This includes the following: learning to learn, motivating the child to find pleasure in learning, and developing the child's ability to attend to others, engage in purposeful action, and view adults as sources of information and reward. Black parents, especially in disadvantaged rural communities, must be trained to realize the importance of their role in encouraging and assisting their children in doing well in school. Low-literate persons who are or will be parents should be empowered to contribute meaningfully to their children's education. The first step to empowering them is to improve the literacy of family units. Adult basic education programs catering to diversified needs are essential to bring about intergenerational literacy. Adult basic education and training in South Africa must shift its focus to family literacy. (Contains 10 references.) (YLB)

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THE RELEVANCE OF FAMILY LITERACY IN THE EDUCATION OF A CHILD

M. M. RAMARUMO

1. INTRODUCTION

We are nearing the end of 1994. It has been a significant year. It has been the year in which the importance of the family has been acknowledged internationally. This year also marked our country's first democratic election and a commitment *towards nation-building*, reconstruction and development of the South African society. The family is an important and vital institution in society which must be included in this process. Sewpaul(1993: 188) rightly states that *'As the family remains the central building block in society, it is not desirable but absolutely essential that we empower and strengthen this key unit'*.

Apartheid and its associated laws, especially those related to Influx Control and mass removals, have for many years negated the importance of the Black family as a central building block in South Africa. Black families were dislocated and children deprived of their parents. A unique situation was created which defied international theories on issues regarding human rights and family life. The repeal of Influx Control has led to many informal settlements - a product of unplanned massive rural-urban migration. These people settled in any patch of 'vacant' land without the barest essential services like running water and/or sanitation being in existence.

On account of the previous system, the majority of Blacks were denied access to basic education, including literacy and numeracy. This denial has consigned millions of Black South Africans to silence and marginalisation from

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effective and meaningful participation in social and economic development. It is estimated that 15 million adults (over one-third of the population of South Africa) are illiterate and have had little or no formal education. Taken that a very large percentage of these adults are parents with children living in remote and/or disadvantaged communities, the lack of family literacy becomes clear. The importance of intergenerational and family literacy can, therefore, not be overemphasized in South Africa. Methods should be explored whereby parents of young black school children, especially from disadvantaged communities, are empowered to play a confident and active role in the formal education of their own children.

This paper intends to look at the relevance of family literacy in the education of the child, with particular reference to the South African situation with its millions of people, especially those in disadvantaged rural areas, who are currently illiterate or insufficiently literate.

2. DEFINING FAMILY LITERACY

Before I continue, it is important to clarify what I mean when I speak of family literacy. I would like to define family literacy as the entire range of activities and practices that are integrated into the daily life of a family to promote learning.

However, family literacy cannot be seen in isolation from intergenerational literacy. These two go hand in hand. Intergenerational literacy, to my mind, refers to the tendency to pass on literacy abilities or a lack of them from parent to child.

3. FAMILY LITERACY AND CHILD DEVELOPMENT

The most significant factor contributing to young children's learning success is that they need to be exposed to stimulating experiences by their parents and/or other family members. Informal home learning experiences determine the child's capacity to derive optimal benefit from the formal learning experiences provided in the school setting. It is widely accepted that the home (i.e. family) plays a fundamental role in providing the foundation for a child's effective learning. The important role of the family in a child's education is well documented, inter alia, by Mkwanazi (1993:8) who states *'Parents are, indeed, the child's teachers, and home is actually the first classroom'*.

According to Jubber (1989), the factors which correlate most significantly with scholastic achievement point towards the centrality of literacy in the home environment. Coming from a socio-economically under-privileged home where parents are usually illiterate and do not read and write as part of their everyday existence, the child often enters school lacking the basic knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary to benefit from formal instruction, namely, pre-literacy and pre-numeracy skills, the motivation and the cognitive sets or strategies needed to cope with the demands of formal schooling. The level of literacy in the home and a child's exposure to learning experiences especially, therefore determine the success of his/her instruction at school, which in turn forms the key to scholastic and later vocational achievement.

It is posited that even illiterate parents may contribute more meaningfully to their children's development and progress by:

* telling them stories and inviting them to participate in story-telling;
* exposing them to pictures, books and print;
* creating opportunities for reading and writing;
* motivating them continuously.

Apart from stimulating stories, told by anyone, children's language awareness can be stimulated through word and sound games, songs, rhymes and puzzles.

These activities contribute to the child's total development and enable him/her to cope with further learning experiences once he/she is admitted to school. It should be stressed that the aim with stimulating children to learn, is not for parents to do the school's job, such as teaching the child to read, to spell and even to do simple arithmetic. It is, however, important that the home environment provides a more basic type of learning. This includes learning to learn, motivating the child to find pleasure in learning, developing the child's ability to attend to others and to engage in purposeful action, to delay gratification of desires and to view adults as sources of information and reward.

4. ILLITERACY OF BLACK FAMILIES

On account of the legacy of apartheid, many Black families have had no formal, very little or inadequate education. As the level of family literacy in disadvantaged communities is so low, family members cannot facilitate the process of literacy development among the younger generation. Families are unable to assist the young ones properly, because they do not know what to do or how to do it.

Research among Black parents indicates that the lack of home preparation and support for school learning,

compounded by inadequate formal literacy instruction, and the limited access to books, both at home and in the classroom, has up till now severely disadvantaged the optimal development of Black children, especially rural children (Kriegler. et al. 1993; Ramarumo 1992; Winer 1992). The effects of environmental deprivation have been exacerbated by cultural deprivation, i.e. the intergenerational transfer of culture has been blocked. This situation accords with Feuerstein's theory that inadequacies of mediated learning may occur in any family and derive from many sources, but they are very common in homes characterised by economic deprivation, social and family pathology, and distortions in parent-child relationships (Feuerstein 1980). Implied in the concept of mediated learning experience, is an intergenerational relationship determined by the strong need to ensure continuity beyond the biological existence of an individual.

Given the need to combat illiteracy and cultural deprivation, access to schooling of quality, especially in rural areas - both in the countryside and in small towns - will have to become a national priority. However, providing formal education for children alone will not suffice. Undoubtedly parents' feelings of inadequacy lead to tension in the relationship between the child and parent. Parents and families themselves should, therefore, be empowered to assist their children. Parents, especially in disadvantaged rural communities, must be trained to:

* realise the importance of their role in encouraging and assisting their children to do well in school;
* recognize and use the knowledge and skills that they do have, to actively contribute to their children's

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capacity to benefit from schooling, even though they themselves may not be fully literate or numerate.

5. FAMILY AND INTERGENERATIONAL PROGRAMMES

In recent years it has often been debated that Adult Education and scholastic literacy should be better integrated. There is an international trend to involve parents in a more meaningful way in school activities, policy formation of education, and even in curriculum development. However, research on the implementation of such conceptual approaches in the South African context has been limited and to date there have been no official family literacy programmes at national level. The new democratic Government of national unity is people-centred and committed to eradicating illiteracy and promoting lifelong education for all. It is also in favour of active parental involvement in schools. Close working relationships have been established between the government's policy makers and specialised adult education non-governmental organizations, the business sector and teacher organizations.

Mkwanazi (1993) has explored the involvement of parents in schools in South Africa and in Soweto specifically. He holds that the social circumstances, the educational level or the attitudes of the parents are the obstacles preventing the involvement of parents in school decision-making processes.

Research on intergenerational literacy programmes, which fuse adult literacy and school programmes and aim at enhancing family literacy, show that it is possible to empower parents to help their children to read. This can be achieved, according to Daisey (1991) by shifting the focus of traditional literacy classes from treating illiteracy and low literacy skills as an individual

failure, to using the strengths of adults to promote literacy of an entire family.

For those concerned with the education of children, the promotion of family literacy should be a central concern. The fact that millions of adults are currently illiterate or insufficiently literate in South Africa, requires a specific action plan. These illiterates are or will be parents of children who should be assisted to attain literacy, thus counteracting intergenerational illiteracy. They should be empowered to contribute meaningfully to their children's education. The first step in empowering them is to improve the literacy of family units.

Strategies are needed to assist families to care for and educate their children. They should be enabled to provide in the basic needs of nutrition, health care, love and affection. They are the first educators of their children and have to introduce those children to their culture and values, and the norms of their society.

In the process of teaching and socialisation, they lay a foundation for the life-long process of learning. However, many disadvantaged Black parents still do not understand that children need to be stimulated from an early age. The parents are unable to fulfil their role as primary educators and promoters of family literacy, as long as they themselves are illiterate. Adult Basic Education Programmes, catering for diversified needs with regard to health, nutrition, education, numeracy, etc., are of the essence. This will bring about intergenerational literacy.

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6. THE WAY AHEAD

The trend in South Africa to implement Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET) is still far from comprehensive. The direction that ABET is taking has its own indigenous and historical context. The chief component of ABET is literacy, but it can include any number of courses and provision of skills provided outside of formal education. Organised institutional provision of ABET is very limited. Seventy-seven percent of current ABET services are provided by the state through the Department of Education and the Department of Manpower, 8 percent by industry and 13 percent by NGOs (Interfund 1993).

A professional directorate has been instituted in the new Department of Education, in order to:

* provide a national focal point for government's commitment to the field;
* undertake or sponsor research on structure and methods;
* develop norms and standards for the field;
* liaise with the office of the Recontruction and Development Plan, the Department of Labour Affairs, and provincial departments of education.

The Ministry of Education has also established a national Adult Basic Education and Training Task Team to carry forward the extensive preparatory work which has already been undertaken by the community of Adult Basic Education and Training stakeholders and practitioners. The Department of Education will work with the Task Team to help translate proposals into implementable policy.

All these are a good start, but they target illiterate Adults in general. The focus has not yet shifted towards

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family literacy. The relevance of family literacy in the education of our children has not yet been properly acknowledged.

7. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I want to state that if we believe that our children are our future, we must start with the home and the family. *The child must be seen in context,* i.e. the circumstances in which he/she lives and grows up. Childhood experiences vary in relation to family and community. The child must be catered for in relation to kin, parents, grandparents, brothers, sisters, uncles, aunts, relatives. The family being the place where the child lives with others, is the place where the child forms emotional ties and bonds of love. It is indeed the central building block of society. Unless the relevance of family literacy in the education of the child is firmly acknowledged, the reconstruction and development of South African society will not be fully achieved.

What role can each of you play to assist my country in achieving this?

You can network with us, you can share your programmes and intergenerational materials and your research findings. Surely we need not re-invent the wheel. We should merely be enabled to adapt your wheel to fit our family literacy cart. I thank you.

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